



Guide to the California First Theatre Collection

Monterey State Historic Park

Monterey, California

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Date Completed:

2002

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Descriptive Summary

Collection Title

California First Theatre Collection, 1840-1981 (bulk 1880-1920)

Collection Number

455.1

Collector

Monterey State Historic Park (Monterey, Calif.)

Extent

12.49 cubic feet (19 boxes)

Repository

California State Parks. Monterey State Historic Park (Monterey, Calif.).

Physical location

For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the Monterey District Museum Curator at (831) 659-7118.

Administrative Information

Access

The collection is open for research by appointment only. Appointments may be made by calling (831) 649-7110

Accruals

Additional materials may be added to this collection as donations are received.

Additional Materials

This collection contains only those materials suitable for treatment as archives. Artifacts, monographs (books), and decorative objects housed in the California First Theatre are not included in this collection. For more information on these additional materials, contact the Monterey District Museum Curator at (831) 649-7118.

Publication Rights

Property rights reside with California State Parks. Literary rights are retained by the creators of the records and their heirs. For permission to reproduce or to publish, please contact Monterey State Historic Park.

Preferred Citation

[item], California First Theatre Collection, Monterey State Historic Park, Monterey, California.

Separated materials

All books, with the exception of part- and songbooks in the collection are collected and stored on adjacent shelving with books from other Monterey State Historic Park archives collections. They are not included in this collection and have been inventoried separately.

Organizational History

The building in which the first paid public dramatic entertainment in California was staged is located in Old Monterey. John Alfred (Jack) Swan, a sailor of Scottish descent, arrived in Monterey in 1843 as a crew member on the *Soledad*, a Mexican brig engaged in the coast trade between Mexico and Alta California. Upon arriving in Monterey, Swan likes the small city and decides to stay. A lack of immediate employment forces him to sea again, this time as a cook on the Mexican schooner *California*, captained by John B.R. Cooper, another American destined to historical importance in Monterey. After a pair of successful trade voyages between Monterey and the Mexican port of Mazatlan, Swan's culinary skills lose their luster with Captain Cooper and he loses his post. Whether he was fired or jumped ship is unknown, but he arrives in Monterey at the end of 1844, once again with no work. This time, enterprising Swan decides to make a name for himself as a baker and manages to set up a small shop. The American influx to California has begun in earnest by this time and Swan's Yankee patrons soon make Swan's pies a favored concoction. By 1846, with money acquired from the business, he purchases some land on the old Calle Estrada, now the southwest corner of Pacific and Scott Streets. In the summer of the following year he begins construction on an adobe structure, a small house already having been built, with the idea of turning it into a boarding house for itinerant sailors such as he was just a few years prior.

In March 1847 the first of three American transport ships arrives in San Francisco, carrying detachments of the First New York Volunteer Regiment, under the command of Colonel Jonathan Drake Stevenson. By April 1848, Companies D, E, F, G, and I were assigned to Monterey, where the soldiers remained for some months until they were either transferred to other coast cities or mustered out of the service. A number of New Yorkers from Companies D and I, used to the myriad of entertainment choices afforded their leave time in the large cities of the East Coast, devised their own entertainments in Monterey to help relieve the monotony of camp life. The war with Mexico by this time virtually over, a few of the sailors knew their muster was soon to come and, concluding that their entertainments might fetch them money and a possible living after the government's paychecks stopped, approached Swan with the idea of leasing part of his adobe as a theatre. Swan, ever mindful of new and enterprising ways to make money, was favorable to the idea.

Pressed into service quickly, the building was fitted with whatever could be used to make the building suitable for dramatic performance: scraps of lumber, shipping crates, and barrels for the stage and seats, blankets for the curtains. As money came in from admissions, better materials were used, scenery and costumes of higher quality. With no programs or handbills in existence, it is not definitely known what play was the first play performed in Swan's theatre. According to Bancroft, one of the plays given in the Spring of 1848 was Putnam, or, the Lion Son of '76, which was quite profitable. In fact, the theatre was by all accounts a remarkable success, having taken in \$500 in admissions on the first night's performance alone. Melodramas popular at the time were the prevailing works performed in the theatre, complete with a small orchestra adept at accenting every heroine's anguished wail and every villain's mustache twitch.

By 1849, Gold Rush fever was sweeping California, and Monterey was not immune to the loss of population to the gold mines of the Sierras. Performers from Los Angeles came north to attempt

to fill the gap, but by the end of 1849, the lure of gold and riches had taken its number of men to the mountains, including Swan, and the company disbanded.

Over the ensuing years, Swan leased his building to a number of business people and it served a variety of functions: whaling station, drug dispensary and store, and eventually a tea room and shop. Swan traveled both in and out of Monterey over the next 35 years, retiring by 1885 to the old adobe, having won and lost a number of fortunes in different ventures. In 1896 Jack Swan died with no heirs, and the old adobe and house began to deteriorate, sitting abandoned until 1906.

1906 brings the crumbling adobe some good fortune when a group of local Monterey citizens, assisted with funds from W.R. Hearst's California Historic Landmarks League, purchase the building and deed it to the State. By 1920 the adobe and house undergo a complete restoration and open to the public as a museum. In 1937, the State leased the buildings to Denny-Watrous Management, a performing arts organization dedicated to reviving the performance of melodrama in the old First Theatre. A company, Troupers of the Gold Coast, comprised of mostly local residents, revive the performances of late 19th-century melodrama followed by an Olio, an audience sing-along. These performances continued without interruption through a couple of management changes until the buildings closed again for further restoration in 1999.

Chronology

1844 John A. (Jack) Swan acquires land on Calle Estrada, now sw corner of Pacific and Scott Streets in Monterey. House is built. Part of it later becomes a saloon.

1847 Long adobe complete by the end of the year and serves as a boarding house for sailors, along with the saloon. Swan a successful businessman.

1848-50 Begins conversion of building into a theatre. First play produced in spring. Performances continue with a resident group of locals and mustered sailors through February 1850. Ten plays are produced over the twenty one months.

1850-1896 Swan rents his adobe and begins a life seeking gold in the Sierra. The house and adobe function over the next 46 years as a lodging house, whaling station (addition of a look out tower occurred in the 1850s), a drug store in the 1870s and finally a tea room and shop.

1885 After a Gold Rush boom-and-bust life, Swan retires penniless to his house.

1896 Swan dies. The adobe and house sit empty and begin to deteriorate.

1906 Building purchased by a group of Monterey citizens and deeded to the State of California.

1920 Restoration complete and buildings reopened as a museum.

1937 Denny-Watrous Management of Carmel lease the building for theatrical performances. The Troupers of the Gold Coast begin residence.

1999 Building closed for renovation.

Bibliography

Additional information about the California First Theatre may be found in the following publications:

Bancroft, Hubert Howe, 1832-1918. History of California. San Francisco: The History Company, 1998-1890.

MacMinn, George Rupert The Theatre of the Golden Era in California. Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, 1941.

Tays, George. **First theater in California**. Berkeley: Works Progress Administration, 1936.

Works Progress Administration. Historical Survey of the Monterey Peninsula, Project #4080. San Francisco: Works Progress Administration, 1937.

Collection Scope and Content Summary

The California First Theatre Collection consists of records, artifacts, and memorabilia connected with the oldest theatrical performance house in California, the site of the first minstrelsy production on the West Coast in 1847, and in 1848, the first play. While the collection contains only one real document and some reproductions of the original documents recording the building's existence such as the land title and promissory notes, and virtually no evidence of its storied first activity period as a theater, 1848-1850, the collection is rich in documentation of the plays and music performed in the theatre during its last major period of activity, the years 1937 to 1999. In addition, the collection contains significant documentation for both activity periods of contemporary theatrical performance in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York City. This is revealed in the collection's large holding of American sheet music and song books, with copyright dates spanning a century, as well as scrapbook collections of playbills, theatrical advertisements, and reviews.

Additional materials of note are the autograph manuscript essay by Jack Swan, "My Old Spectacles," the collection of cartes de visite, featuring popular San Francisco and international theatrical personalities of the late 19th century, as well as a large number of stereopticon cards. The stereopticon cards include, among many views, images of pre-1906 earthquake San Francisco and prominent mansions and hotels of the city, along with Yosemite Valley images photographed and published by the Carlton E. Watkins studio.

The collection is organized into nine series:

- Series 1. Administrative and historical records
- Series 2. Correspondence
- Series 3. Ephemera
- Series 4. Olio performance sheet music
- Series 5. Oversize materials
- Series 6. Photographs
- Series 7. Publicity
- Series 8. Scrapbooks
- Series 9. Scripts, scores, music instruction and part books

Indexing Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in a library's online public access catalog:

Library of Congress Subject Headings

Personal Names:

Booth, Edwin, 1833-1893.

Montez, Lola, 1818-1861.

Swan, John Alfred, 1817-1896.

Subjects:

California—History.

California—Pioneers.

Historic buildings--California—Monterey.

Monterey (Calif.)—History.

Theater—California—Monterey.

Collection Contents

Series 1. Administrative and Historical Records, 1844-1981. 1.46 cubic ft.

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains records of the California First Theatre State Historic Monument and State Parks documentation of visitors, production attendance, weather, and historical collections provenance. In addition, this series contains one of the significant documents in the building's history, the original bill of sale for the land to Jack Swan, signed by both Swan and Marcelino Escobar, Alcalde of Monterey, 1844, and a reproduction of the abstract of title. An interesting anecdote by Swan, "My Old Spectacles," in autograph, is also in this series.

BOX 1: (16 folders)

1. Warden's weekly report – 1937
2. Warden's weekly report – 1938
3. Warden's weekly report – 1939
4. Warden's weekly report – 1940
5. Warden's weekly report – 1941
6. Warden's weekly report – 1942
7. Warden's weekly report – 1943
8. Warden's weekly report – 1944
9. Warden's weekly report – 1945
10. Warden's weekly report – 1946
11. Warden's weekly report – 1947
12. Warden's weekly report – 1948
13. Warden's weekly report – 1949
14. Warden's weekly report – 1950
15. Warden's weekly report – 1951
16. Warden's weekly report – 1952

BOX 2: (14 folders)

1. Supervisor's weekly report – 1953
2. Supervisor's weekly report – 1954
3. Supervisor's weekly report – 1955
4. Supervisor's weekly report – 1956
5. Supervisor's weekly report – 1957
6. Supervisor's weekly report – 1958
7. Supervisor's weekly report – 1959
8. Supervisor's weekly report – 1960
9. Supervisor's weekly report – 1961
10. Supervisor's weekly report – 1962
11. Supervisor's weekly report – 1963
12. Supervisor's weekly report – 1964
13. Supervisor's weekly report – 1965

14. Supervisor's weekly report – 1966

BOX 3: (8 folders)

1. Historical Guide's weekly report – 1974
2. Historical Guide's weekly report – 1975
3. Historical Guide's weekly report – 1976
4. Historical Guide's weekly report – 1977
5. Historical Guide's weekly report – 1978
6. Historical Guide's weekly report – 1979
7. Historical Guide's weekly report – 1980
8. Historical Guide's weekly report – 1981

BOX 4: (8 folders)

1. Abstract of Title (reproduction).
2. Original bill of sale for land to Jack Swan, 1844.
3. Manuscript essay by Jack Swan, "My Old Spectacles."
4. Gift agreements and loan documentation.
5. List of First Theatre productions under Denny-Watrous Management, 1937-1959.
6. List of First Theatre productions, 1937-1962, prepared by Vera Stewart.
7. Merienda schedule, 1949.
8. Supervisory Practices Course SP-1 study guide, Dept. of Parks and Recreation, January, 1966. Robert Reese, trainee.
9. Visitor Register, 2/27/1927-8/11/1928.

Series II. Correspondence, 1946-1948. .18 cubic ft.**Series Scope and Content Summary**

This small series highlights correspondence related to the California First Theatre, in particular that related to gifts received as part of the historical collections.

BOX 5: (16 folders)

1. Correspondence, 1946 - 1948.
2. Gift Correspondence, 1958.

Series III. Ephemera, 1880-1972. .18 cubic ft.**Series Scope and Content Summary**

This series contains ephemeral items such as performance programs and tickets from the California First Theatre, and other interesting theatrical and festival memorabilia from San Francisco, Monterey, and Chicago.

Subseries 1. First Theatre ephemera

3. Hand-written song lyrics for two songs, n.d.:
All for a Woman's Love, The Black Sheep Loves You Best of All.
4. Performance programs – 1944, 1959 (includes 5 copies of promotional postcard from 1959 production of “*After Dark.*”
5. Performance programs – 1960-1962
6. Performance programs – 1963-1972
7. Performance ticket from “*The Unkissed Bride*”

Subseries 2. Non-First Theatre ephemera

8. 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition brochure and admission ticket
9. Kirby's Opera House (Chicago, IL) performance program, 1880s
10. Lake County promotional brochure, n.d.
11. Leavitt's Bush St. Theatre (San Francisco, CA) performance program, 1885
12. Monterey, CA event and informational brochures: Hotel Del Monte, n.d.; Merienda celebration, 1945; Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West Admission Day Celebration program, 1954; State Historical Monuments at Monterey brochure, n.d.
13. Orpheum Theatre (San Francisco, CA) 10th anniversary souvenir booklet, 1897.
14. Picture post cards, various Monterey area views: Hotel Del Monte, Monterey cypress trees, California First Theatre, etc., n.d.
15. Tivoli Opera House (San Francisco, CA) performance program, 1899
16. Zepeda's Mexican restaurant (Monterey, CA) menu, 1962

Series IV: Olio Performance Sheet Music, 1840-1940. 1.95 cubic ft.

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains approximately 150 pieces per box of an extensive collection of American sheet music. Date range spans 1840-1940. Not arranged in any particular order.

BOX 6: (7 folders)

BOX 7: (6 folders)

BOX 8: (9 folders)

BOX 9: (8 folders)

BOX 10: (8 folders)

BOX 11: (9 folders)

Series V: Oversize Materials, 1903 and undated. 4.38 cubic ft.

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains materials larger than the standard letter format that need to be stored flat. Includes a nice watercolor of the California First Theatre, maker unidentified.

BOX 12: (5 folders)

1. Periodical: *California Ladies Magazine*, December, 1903.

2. Photograph, mounted: Interior of California First Theatre, WPA photo series taken by Sibyl Anikeeff
3. Photoreproduction: Newspaper article re: Lola Montez residence in Grass Valley, CA n.d.
4. Promotional brochure: Monterey Chamber of Commerce re: Monterey Peninsula recreation and living. n.d.
5. Watercolor on paper, unframed: California First Theatre. Unidentified maker n.d.

Series VI: Photographs, 1852-1895 and undated. 1.10 cubic ft.

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains all photographs and photographic material in the collection, including a large number of stereopticon cards of various Monterey, other California and European views.

BOX 13: (5 folders)

Subseries 1. First Theatre related photographs - 4 items

1. First Theatre parade entry, n.d.; Audience, California First Theatre, Olio performance. n.d.; 2 Black Bart reward notice photoreproductions, n.d. (includes four 3" x 4" negatives of the interior of the First Theatre, n.d.)
2. Photoreproduction, "Lola coming!" political cartoon

Subseries 2. Non-First Theatre related photographs

3. 2 mounted albumen prints: Unidentified man, n.d.; View of San Francisco waterfront, 1852.
4. 13 card-mounted albumen prints, various subjects, incl. Pacific Grove, Del Monte, Monterey, Mission San Miguel.
5. Souvenir photogravure album: cast of *Trilby*, London stage production, 1895.

BOX 14: 98 items

43 cartes de visite and cabinet card photographs, various subjects, including late 19th century theatrical personalities in San Francisco, along with various San Francisco views such as interior views of the Palace Hotel, Mark Hopkins mansion, Stanford mansion, and other California and non-California locales.

55 stereopticon cards, various views, including Yosemite Valley and other California locations, European and Asian landmarks.

BOX 15: 74 items

74 stereopticon cards, various views, including Yosemite Valley and other California locations and non-California locations, European and Asian landmarks.

Series VII: Publicity, 1874-1969. .37 cubic ft.

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains periodicals, some containing articles related to the California First Theatre, others with articles relating to Monterey in general.

Arranged alphabetically by title of publication and then chronologically if more than one issue.

BOX 16: (12 folders)**Subseries 1. First Theatre-related publications**

1. *Californian, The*. V:29. August 11, 1937. Six copies. Features article on the reopening of the First Theatre as a performing house
2. Assorted newspaper clippings, 1937-1962

Subseries 2. Non-First Theatre-related publications

3. *American West, The*. I:1, Winter 1965
4. *Buick Magazine*. II:6, September 1936
4. *Californian, The*. V:10, March 31, 1937
5. *Days Doings, The*. XIII:333, October 10, 1874
6. *Film Year, The*. 1949
7. *MotorLand*. XXXII:4. April 1933; XXXV:2. August 1934
8. "The Mid-Spring Stage – A Season Still Active." *New York Times, The*. Sunday, May 13, 1928
9. *Noticias del Puerto de Monterey*. XIII:4. December 1969. Monterey: Monterey History and Art Association
10. *Saludos amigos!* City of Monterey: Office of the Mayor. n.d.
10. *Rambler, The*. I:8. March 1936
11. *Theatre World*. Vols. II-V. 1945-46 – 1949-50
12. *Women's City Club Magazine*. I:9 October 1927. San Francisco: Women's City Club

Series VIII: Scrapbooks, 1870-1965. 2.5 cubic ft.**Series Scope and Content Summary**

This series contains scrapbooks of accumulated news clippings and theatrical advertisements from New York City, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, along with a scrapbook of California First Theatre playbills from 1938-1960.

BOX 17: 2 items

1. Scrapbook of various New York theatrical advertisements and announcements, 1889 – 1899, including the Metropolitan Opera House and other prominent 19th century performance houses.
2. Scrapbook of California First Theatre playbills from 1938-1960, incl. handwritten list of productions on rear pages through 1963 and typewritten list through 1965.

BOX 18: 8 items

1. – 3. empty scrapbook covers
4. 2 scrapbook remnants of few pages and no covers chronicling the history of the California First Theatre, productions and restoration (no dates)
5. scrapbook of song lyrics, newsclippings, advertisements and envelope of playbills from San Francisco performance houses, 1894 – 1898.
6. broadside advertising sale of livestock, 1870
7. scrapbook of theatre advertisements and playbills, Virginia City and Boston areas, 1878 – 1883
8. scrapbook of theatre advertisements and playbills, Chicago and surrounding metropolitan area, 1913

Series IX: Scripts, Scores, Musical Instruction and Part Books, 1855-1943. .37 cubic ft.

Series Scope and Content Summary This series contains an assortment of play scripts, musical scores, and music instruction books with dates ranging from 1855 to 1943. Approximately half of the items date before 1900. It is possible that some of the musical selections in these books were used for the Olio performances after the plays presented at the Theatre. Arranged chronologically.

BOX 19: (11 folders)

1. Rachel, Mlle. Adrienne Lecouvreur. New York: Darcie & Corbyn, 1855.
2. *Newburgh Musical Bulletin*. II:1, January 1872.
3. *Peters Musical Monthly*. XIV:85, September 1874.
4. *Sherman & Hyde's Musical Review*. IV:1, January 1876; IV:7, July 1877; IV:9, September 1877.
5. 455-58-15 to 455-58-19: 5 play scripts, plus 1 Samuel French catalog, 1880-81.
6. Bower, Harry A. Imperial Method for the Drum. Cincinnati: John Church Co., 1898.
7. Loeschhorn, A. Loeschhorn's Progressive Piano Studies. New York: T.B. Harms & Co., n.d.
8. Dodge, May Hewes and John Wilson. In the Garden of the Shah. New York (?): Willis Music Company, 1920.
9. U.S. School of Music. Home Study Lessons for Piano. New York: U.S. School of Music, 1925.
10. Part book: Song, "Taking a Chance on Love" by Duke, Fetter, and Latouche. New York: Leo Feist, 1940.
11. *Big Song Magazine*. III:4, May 1943.